

## **Where have all the nurse aides gone? Part II.**

**Thomas R. Konrad  
Jennifer Craft Morgan**

*North Carolina Institute on Aging  
October 15, 2002*

This report is the result of a study commissioned by the NC Department of Health and Human Services conducted and compiled by the NC Institute on Aging (NCIOA). Using two employment-related databases maintained by the state, the NC wage and employment histories and the NC Nurse Aide Registry, information was compiled about individuals who have successfully completed competency as nursing assistants (NAs).

*The specific objectives of this study were to:*

- (1) compare current measures of wages, and job stability for active (eligible to work as a nursing aide) and inactive (no longer eligible to work as a nurse aide) registrants to those of 1998,*
- (2) estimate the extent to which active NAs in North Carolina are employed in the long-term care and other healthcare sectors,*
- (3) determine whether career progression as a NA is evident for continuously certified nursing assistants.*

## **Background**

Long-term care organizations will experience dramatic increases in demand for services as the baby boom generation ages. Concurrently, many states, including North Carolina are already experiencing nurse aide recruitment and retention problems for both residential and community based programs that assist elderly and disabled individuals. The most recent average annual (2000-2001) turnover rate for nursing assistants (NAs) in North Carolina's skilled nursing care facilities was approximately 100%; this rate has not changed for the last three years. Not surprisingly, about 75% of administrators of long-term care organizations surveyed in North Carolina report that recruiting nursing assistants for their organization is difficult. Without an ongoing profile of the available workforce, it is difficult to attribute the turnover crisis to a single phenomenon. For example, are these high levels of turnover due to an overall workforce shortage (i.e., lack of capable and qualified recruits) or to movement of workers seeking alternative employment between different industrial sectors or among sectors in long-term care? Hence, an understanding of the overall employment patterns of the NA workforce enables us to address this question.

## **Methodology**

Data were collected from two of North Carolina's state-operated employment-related data sources. The first data set is NC Nurse Aide Registry that contains all individuals certified as having completed training as a Nurse Aide I at anytime since 1990. Registrants on the registry file (February, 2002) were identified as either currently active or inactive. The second data set

was the North Carolina wage and employment histories containing information on all workers and their wages paid by employers in North Carolina. These data were extracted from summary reports filed by employers each quarter with the NC Employment Security Commission. These two data sources were linked by the NC Department of Labor (NCDOL) at the request of NCIOA and were merged to create a file where registrants, wages – as reported by employers, and regional characteristics were available for analyses. Due to confidentiality issues, our partners at the NCDOL provide the data in aggregated tables only. This means that the unit of analysis must be “jobs” rather than individuals. Jobs with different employers are counted separately; different jobs at the same place of employment would be counted as a single job. Thus, individuals who hold multiple jobs may be counted multiple times. While these data have limitations associated with the non-independence created by counting jobs rather than individual nurse aides, they are currently the only data of this type on this workforce. Despite this weakness, analyses of these data should elucidate the patterns of employment for these workers. Wage data analyzed here reflect “nominal wages”, i.e., actual dollar amounts received at the time the wages were paid, not “real wages” i.e., dollars adjusted for inflation and changes in the cost of living.

### **How do active registrants compare to inactive registrants over time?**

Over the last two fiscal years (July 1, 2000-June 30, 2002), the number of newly registered nursing assistants appears to be outpacing the number of nursing assistants becoming inactive. The total number of active NAs has grown steadily from 85,148 as of June 30, 2000 to 87,384 as of June 30, 2001 to 95,092 as of June 30, 2002. In addition, the ratio of newly active to newly inactive NAs has also increased indicating that, in North Carolina, the production of newly certified nursing assistants is rising as the number of NAs leaving the field decreases.

| <b>Table 1: Newly Registered Nursing Assistants and Newly Inactive Nursing Assistants in North Carolina (July 1, 2000 – June 30, 2002)</b> |                                     |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|  | <b>July 1, 2000 – June 30, 2001</b> | <b>July 1, 2001 – June 30, 2002</b> |
| <b>Number of newly registered nursing assistants:</b>  | 15,540                              | 18,825                              |
| <b>Number of NAs who became in active:</b>   | 13,304                              | 11,117                              |
| <b>Ratio of newly registered to newly inactive:</b>  | 1.17                                | 1.69                                |

Whether this phenomenon is reflective of an increase in the number of NAs who are committed to the occupation or whether it is simply due to a decrease in the availability of other jobs due to a downturn in the economy cannot be determined from these data. Continued monitoring of these trends may allow us to distinguish these factors in the future.

As in 1998, active registrants are worse off when compared to inactive registrants in terms of both median nominal wages and average number of employers. Both groups appear to be doing somewhat better in terms of overall wages and somewhat worse in terms of job stability (having wages reported from more than one employer over the four quarters in 2001).

| <b>Table 2: Comparing Median Wages and Average Number of Employers for Active and Inactive Nursing Assistants in North Carolina (1998-2001)</b> |                   |                   |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|
|   | <b>ACTIVE</b>     | <b>INACTIVE</b>   |
| <b>1998 Median Wages (80<sup>th</sup> percentile)</b>   | \$11358 (\$18360) | \$14425 (\$25505) |
| <b>2001 Median Wages (80<sup>th</sup> percentile)</b>   | \$12877 (\$20883) | \$17359 (\$30975) |
| <b>Average Annual Change in Median Wages</b>  | 4%                | 7%                |
| <b>1998 Average Number of Employers</b>   | 1.89              | 1.05              |
| <b>2001 Average Number of Employers</b>   | 2.30              | 1.95              |

### **Where do NAs come from and where do they go?**

From an analysis of active registrant wages prior to certification, these workers appear to be recruited into NA training while working in “service jobs.” For example, 28% of the jobs held by active registrants before certification are in wholesale and retail trade--such employment settings as eating and drinking places and food stores. Another 17% come from service jobs such as cleaning and cooking jobs and temporary agencies. A comparable number (16%) come from manufacturing jobs, transportation and public works jobs.

If we examine the jobs of active registrants in 2001 as compared to 1998, we see that overall, more of these jobs are in health-related sectors (60%) than in 1998 (53%). Similarly, of the total number of jobs held by active registrants, 36% and 42% were in long-term care sector<sup>1</sup> in 1998 and 2001 respectively. While this is an improvement in the percentages of active registrants working in health-related sectors, approximately 40% of the primary or secondary jobs held by active registrants are in non-health sectors. We estimate, from another source<sup>2</sup>, that approximately 38% of active registrants were not working as a nursing assistant in 2001.

Looking to the job distributions of inactive registrants in 2001, inactive registrants who have left the field generally go back to the same types of “service jobs” newly active nursing assistants held previously. The four most common sectors are wholesale and retail trade (17%), hospitals (14%), services such as cleaning and cooking jobs and temporary agencies (12%) and manufacturing, transportation or public works jobs (11%). While some inactive registrants are still in the health sector, the majority (65%) currently worked in non-health sector jobs in 2001.

### **Is career progression evident for nursing assistants who are continuously certified?**

In order to answer this question, we need to examine trends in median wages for continuously registered active nursing assistants (i.e., on the nurse aide registry for the entire period from 1993 to 2001). Out of the more than 210,000 persons who have been registered as NAs over the last decade, there were 20,729 individuals who have been active without interruption. This “core”

<sup>1</sup> Long-term care encompasses skilled nursing facilities, personal care facilities, home health and residential care.

<sup>2</sup> Preliminary results of a telephone survey of active registrants conducted by the WIN A STEP UP project.

workforce consists of individuals whom we may presume have more or less made a career out of being a nursing assistant.

Overall wages received by continuously registered nursing assistants working in nursing homes exceed those in other long-term care settings. Jobs, for this core workforce, in skilled nursing facilities have higher starting wages and a steeper trajectory than those who work in personal care facilities, home health care, and residential care. This may be due either to a lack of job ladders within these organizations for NAs or due to the within-sector mobility. Overall, wages for continuously active nursing assistants are relatively flat in long-term care over the period between 1993 and 2001.

Continuously active nursing assistants in other health sectors have steeper trajectories than do those in the long-term care sector. Hospital jobs, on average, accrue higher wages than do doctor's offices and other health related jobs. Hospitals also seem to have a more consistent upward wage trajectory.

## **Conclusion**

The results discussed here present a mixed outlook for nursing assistants in North Carolina. Active and inactive registrants enjoyed an average annual increase in median wages of 4% and 7% respectively. However, median wages for active registrants remains lower than that of inactive registrants. The average number of employers per year for both active and inactive registrants has increased. Only about 60% of active registrants are actually working jobs as nursing assistants. The annual number of newly registered nursing assistants continues to grow as the number of NAs becoming inactive annually is decreasing. While this is likely an improvement in the eyes of administrators and recruiters attempting to improve both recruitment and retention in healthcare organizations in North Carolina, it may be a short-term phenomenon. Finally, career progression, in terms of median wage trends, appears relatively flat even for those who have made a "career" out of being a nursing assistant. The need to assess the relative impact of the current economic downturn and NA workforce improvements warrants continued monitoring of employment and nurse aide registry data.